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Challenging media and communication studies

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Introduction

Researching online worlds:

Challenging media and communication studies

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The defining characteristic of a world is that it is inhabited. The same is true for fictional worlds in books and movies or simulated worlds in computer games – and even empty worlds are conceived within this logic: as worlds *without* inhabitants. The way we function as human beings is as – connecting and communicating – inhabitants in a world, as situated in time and space, physically rooted in a specific place, but – qua the use of media – with the ability to transport to and connect with other places. We travel and we communicate over long distances and thus are both local and global inhabitants in a world tied together by media and communication.

Digital media and network communication technology have not changed this setup, but rather have opened the possibility for encountering and experiencing additional types of worlds and performing additional types of spatial practices (Cf. Lefebvre 1991). Being situated online and globally networked with the possibility of both synchronous and asynchronous communication, digitally mediated worlds provide possible interactions between users which are radically more independent of time and place than the ones facilitated by older media. From this perspective, the concept of online worlds both challenges and broadens our understanding of how media shape the world and how the media technology creates new social structures.

The degree of fragmentation and globalisation in our modern society (as analysed by, e.g., Giddens, 1990), in which physical distances, time and space no longer are fixed entities, is radically increased by mobile communication technology and the Internet, for example. Communities are not limited to their members being present at the same (physical) place at the same time, and the modern individual is not tied to one location; rather, the way we live is by being present in many different places. We are simultaneously connected online to our job, family, friends, the local grocery shop as well as various online communities and networks. From this follows that our way of living consists of a blend between offline and online activities and that understanding the ontology of online worlds implies taking into account the role of the media and the relations between offline and online communication.

Online worlds and the construction and perception of places

Following Lefebvre's argument in *The Production of Space* (1991) that space is a complex social construction which affects spatial practices and perceptions, it can be argued that media play a crucial role in this process and that online worlds as a specific type of constructed space relate to how media shape today's space(s) for social interactions, the construction of communities, as well as the construction of identities. Ever since Meyrowitz wrote *No Sense of Place* (1985), his ideas about how the (at that time) new media influence our perception of time and space have been widely debated within media research. The point proposed by Meyrowitz is that "the evolution in media [...] has changed the logic of the social order by restructuring the relationships between physical place and social place and by altering the ways in which we transmit and receive social information" (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 308). However, we may also argue that today's new media are not just (re)shaping our sense of place, but actually producing new types of places and new types of spatial experiences. Paddy Scannell (1996, p. 172) claims that mass media create a doubling of place between the space represented in media and the space in which the media content is perceived. Furthermore, Meyrowitz has more recently pointed out that we experience locally through our bodies, but what we experience may derive from a variety of different spaces brought to us through media:

Today, with hundreds of TV channels, cable networks, satellite systems, and millions of computer web sites, average citizens of all advanced industrialized societies (and many not so advanced societies) have images in their heads of other people, other cities and countries, other professions, and other lifestyles. These images help to shape the imagines elsewhere from which each person's somewhere is conceived. In that sense, all our media – regardless of their manifest purpose and design – function as mental "global positioning systems". [...] although most intense interactions continue to take place in specific physical settings, they are now often perceived as occurring in a much larger social arena. The local and the global co-exist in the glocality. (Meyrowitz, 2005, pp. 24-25)

New media – first and foremost digital media – have given us a variety of media generated and mediated places (chats, blogs, community and social networking sites as well as various 3D-worlds from *World of Warcraft* to *Second Life*) as arenas for a wide range of social, political and economical activities. But while media research in the 1990s tended to regard these activities and their mediatic environment as of another order than the "real world" – as an exotic *cyberspace* – the media evolution in the new millennium has made it increasingly clear that the borders between online and offline places and activities are blurred and dissolved and that physical and mediated places are becoming intertwined.

In the age of digital mediatisation and especially with the emergence of social media with its strong emphasis on online communities and online worlds, it becomes increasingly difficult to see places as unmediated or only as locations in the physical (offline) world. When it comes to an online world like, e.g., *Second Life*, it is evident that we have here a computer-mediated online world which to its users is experienced as an actual place (for commercial, cultural and leisure activities) and

which in various and complex ways is symbiotically connected to the off-line world. This is – according to media researchers such as Manovich and Bolter (cf., Fetveit & Stald, 2007) – an example of how digital culture in the new millennium differs from that of the 1990s. In the 1990s, “new media” was seen as something producing a new “sense of place”, a new and strange world, a “cyberspace” situated somewhere else and of a completely different character than what we – using a very problematic term – call “real life”. Today cyberspace and real life are rather part of the same continuum, which also may be seen in new forms of human-computer interaction, in new ways of exploring relationships between the physical world and computer mediated worlds, as seen in new research fields like “augmented reality” and “pervasive computing”. There is a lot of interaction going on between online and offline spheres: the flow of experiences, norms, ideas and so on goes both ways between these different worlds. And this is – as Bolter puts it – because online worlds are part of “real life”, not separated from it: “All these online environments reflect the physical and social worlds in which they are embedded – with all their contradictions” (Fetveit & Stald, 2007, p. 149).

Following this line of thought – as argued by Sandvik and Waade (2008) – places in the physical (offline) world are mediated and mediatised as well. On the level of perception, places are not just something in themselves with an authentic *anthropological* status, as Augé (1995) describes it – they are due to our perceptions, embedded with a surplus of meaning deriving from what we have read, heard and seen about the actual place, deriving from how we imagine this place. And as Meyrowitz would argue, this perceptual process is increasingly connected to our use of media and especially new media (the computer, the Internet and the mobile phone). We draw upon online information and communicate our own experience through Internet applications such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Flickr*, *Google Earth*, together with mobile phone embedded technologies like SMS, MMS, GPS, mp3-players and so on. New media such as *Triplt* enable us to communicate our experiences encountered in actual places and exchange them online and in real-time with friends, family and the rest of the online world (Molz, 2004). Following this line of argument, the experience of places will always be connected to various forms of mediatisation, which define and frame the way we experience and how we define ourselves and the roles we play in connection to this experience. We understand places through media (e.g., *Lonely Planet*, *Google Earth*, travel literature and so on), we use media to construct places (using cameras, mobile phones, GPS, manoeuvring through 3D-structures by means of an interface and some kind of avatar in a computer game, and so on), and media shape our experience of places (guided tours, theme parks, computer-simulated worlds like the ones found in computer games, and so on). So, in regards to Meyrowitz, what is at stake here is not so much that mediated and media-created places, such as online worlds, are changing our sense of place or making our sense of place collapse altogether, but that these places provide new spatial experiences and thus also new senses of identity:

The media-networked glocality also affords the possibility of having multiple, multi-layered, fluid, and endlessly adjustable senses of identity. Rather than needing to choose between local, place-defined identities and more distant ones, we can have them all, not just in rapid sequence but in overlapping experiences. (Meyrowitz, 2005, p. 28)

Online worlds from a research perspective: Presenting the contributing articles

Used for gaming and/or social networking, the avatar-navigated, 3D online world has emerged as a reasonably stable, digital medium. Accordingly, a number of academic perspectives have emerged, e.g., ludological, sociological, economic and narratological perspectives, often with an emphasis on online worlds as gameworlds (cf., Corneliusen & Rettberg, 2008): they are constituted by a computer-created persistent environment in which users may reside and operate as agents by the use of computer-generated representations (avatars). As cultural – and commercially successful – phenomena, the 3D online worlds have been around for more than ten years, but their media history dates back even further: “from the text interfaces of the MUDs of the late 1970s and 1980s via the 1990s *Ultima Online*’s isometric 2D to *Everquest*’s (1999) first-person 3D perspective” (Aarseth, 2008, p. 112). Typical examples of highly popular online worlds today are fiction-based multi-user online games like *World of Warcraft* and more open-ended worlds like *Second Life*, which may be used for a variety of both game and non-game, fictional and non-fictional activities.

However, as argued above, the media evolution suggests that we may need to expand on what we understand as online worlds: the social turn on the Internet with its emphasis on participation, collaboration and community-building paves the way for an understanding of various types of social media such as chat rooms, blogs and social networking sites as additional types of online worlds. If a world is about a place with connecting and communicating inhabitants, there is just cause for calling, e.g., *Facebook* an online world, even though it has no 3D-graphical simulations of this world other than very simple network-representations such as “The Friend Wheel”. The user profile in these networks and communities functions as an avatar through which the user acts and communicates. The complex nature of the medium thus seems to invite a multi-disciplinary approach, or at least a multi-disciplinary openness on the part of the media and the communication studies community.

With this special issue regarding Online Worlds, we would like to take stock of the medium; the challenges it possesses as an object of study, and the possibilities it contains for furthering media and communications studies. Through four articles, the issue takes a closer look at how online worlds – both in a narrow and a broader understanding of the concept – function as a media and communication format. In the article “Here, There and Everywhere: Glocalising Identities in Trans-world Transmedia *Genius Loci*”, Patrick John Coppock, tenured researcher in theory and philosophy of languages at the Department of Social, Cognitive and Quantitative Sciences, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, discusses how – taking into account our increasingly remediated, interconnected, physically and virtually mobile contemporary world – it is conceivable, or feasible, for us actually to be “*here, there, everywhere*” at one and the same time. The author asks whether our predominantly “local” personal, professional and collective narrative histories, and the various cultural traditions that have grown out of these, really have furnished us with relational identity skills that enable us to participate positively and actively in ongoing globalisation processes, and to play a constructive, active, ethical role in the global gameplay arena. Or, do we need to work more closely with non-familiar forms of otherness if we want to develop new types of “glocal” identities, able to mediate and transcend the emotional, conceptual, cultural, and other divides that may hinder the identification, management and a just balancing of “global” and “local” needs, rights and interests?

In her article “Actors and their Use of Avatars as Personal Mediators – an Empirical Study of Avatar-based Sense-makings and Communication Practices in the Virtual Worlds of *EverQuest* and *Second Life*”, Sisse Siggaard Jensen, professor at the Department of Communication, Business and Information Technologies, Roskilde University, states that over the past five years, millions of actors have perceived it as meaningful to move in and settle down in what she calls the Metaverse (a unifying concept for various types of online (virtual) worlds), for example as an adventurous shaman in an advanced role-playing game such as *EverQuest* or as a businesswoman in the social world of *Second Life*. The main question put forward is: how do the actors and gamers of the two types of online worlds make sense of their avatars and the worlds when they act and communicate using their avatars as personal mediators? The analysis of a substantial amount of empirical data collected through participatory observations and in-depth video interviews draws on the concepts of intermediaries and mediators from actor-network theory, sense-making methodology, social psychology and experimental economics, and demonstrates how the actors create personal stories and histories of their avatars that transform them into the mediators of beings in the virtual world, and also how the avatars act as the mediators that transform the actors themselves.

Applying a broader understanding of the concept of online worlds, Anne Scott Sørensen, associate professor at the Institute of Literature, Culture and Media, University of Southern Denmark, uses the article “Social Media and Personal Blogging: Textures, Routes and Patterns” to present research on the Danish blogosphere, with a focus on individual and personal blogging. Inspired by media geography, the article pursues the idea that personal blogging can be understood as an embodied, collaborative and distributed practice which constitutes a digital realm to be inhabited by its users. Within media geography, the concept of “textures”, taken from Henri Lefebvre and the sociology of everyday life, is used to describe how the self, the everyday and the mundane are spun together and mark out different cultural-material routes in and between space and place, real and virtual, and in so doing create different reticular patterns of the commonplace. By means of the concept of textures, routes and patterns, the article identifies four different genres in personal blogging.

In the final – Danish – article, “Sociale netværkssider og digital ungdomskultur (Social Networking Sites and Digital Youth Culture)”, Malene Charlotte Larsen, PhD scholar at the Department of Communication, Aalborg University, takes a closer look at increasingly popular online worlds, such as *Arto*, *Facebook* and *Myspace*, describing their characteristics as social networking sites and how they are used as parts of our everyday lives, maintaining social relations. The article presents a number of concepts that are vital to the understanding of the use of social interactions taking place in these types of online worlds and how they are integrated parts of the lives of young people today.

This issue of *MedieKultur* includes three articles outside the special theme. Thomas Bjørner presents early findings from his research on collective media reception. Danish viewers of the Eurovision Song Contest have been interviewed, with special attention paid to the function and effect of integrating text messaging into the show. Bjørner describes the contest itself as an undemanding, narrative frame for socialising, whilst one of the effects of text messaging is a strengthening of cross-national, Scandinavian identity.

Yngvar Kjus investigates what we experience in the national and local media. Based on a trace of practices of the two largest Norwegian broadcasters over the last two decades, he examines the ways in which licensed international programme formats intervene in existing programme traditions, and affect the repertoire and capacity of national television producers. He suggests that format exchange should be evaluated along a continuum from open to closed; a continuum that can provide nuance for discussions of cultural colonisation.

Charlotte Wien explores the relationships between media and journalism researchers and Danish journalists. She analyses the media's descriptions of research in media and journalism and shows that media coverage of media research can be divided into three categories based on the roles played by media research and researchers.

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